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AUTHOR Coates, Jennifer
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of women's oral discourse patterns focuses on the uses made of minimal responses, hedges, and tag questions. The analysis draws on transcriptions of conversations among a group of women friends over a period of months. It is proposed that the conventional treatment of these forms as "weak" is inappropriate in all-female discourse. In friendly, all-female conversation, these linguistic forms function as cooperative devices. Women use minimal responses to signal active listening and support for the current speaker, and to mark recognition of the different stages of conversational development. Hedges are used to respect the face needs of all participants, negotiate sensitive topics, and encourage participation. Tag questions also encourage participation, but among women friends are more often used to check the taken-for-granted nature of what is being asserted, monitoring group support. Misunderstanding of these and other aspects of women's linguistic style arises from the misunderstanding of female subculture. Typical features can be shown to be functional in terms of the goals of all-female interaction, a characteristics of mutual support and solidarity, and can not be dismissed as weak or tentative. (MSE)

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WOMEN'S SPEECH, WOMEN'S STRENGTH?

Jennifer Coates
(Roehampton Institute)

1. Language and the Androcentric Rule

As far back as we have records, people have commented on sex differences in language. The problem with any kind of variation is that difference is very often construed as inequality: where things are not identical, they are seen in terms of a better-worse relationship. In the case of variation resulting from sex differences, the value-judgement imposed by our culture is that of male/superior, female/inferior. As far as language is concerned, men's language is viewed as the norm, with women's language regarded as a deviation from that norm.

The language of women has been commented on in terms that make clear that it is seen as inferior, as an object of scorn. Proverbs, for example, traditional repositories of folk-wisdom, refer to women's supposed verbosity in disparaging terms: 'Many women, many words; many geese, many turds' (Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs). The writings of so-called 'men of letters' display a similar attitude to women's use of language. Lord Chesterfield, writing in 1741, claimed: 'Most women and all the ordinary people in general speak in open defiance of all grammar', while Wilson (1724) writes: 'Many a pretty Lady by the Silliness of her Words, hath lost the Admiration which her Face had gained'.

Linguistic commentary inevitably reflects cultural prejudices. This has led to some bizarre discrepancies. For example, 18th century commentators, who were concerned to 'fix' the language and who viewed change with alarm, blamed women for introducing unnecessary new words into English vocabulary. At the beginning of this century, by contrast, Jespersen, a Danish philologist, praised men as being the 'chief renovators' of language through their coinage of new words; he described women's vocabulary as 'much less extensive than that of a man' (Jespersen 1922:248). I have called this phenomenon **The Androcentric Rule** (see Coates 1986:15). A revised version of the rule reads: 'At any given time , the linguistic behaviour typical of male speakers will be viewed in positive terms, and will determine what is described as 'normal'; conversely, the linguistic behaviour of female speakers will be viewed negatively, and will be seen as a deviation from the (male) norm'. In this paper, I want to pursue the theme of androcentricity by showing that sociolinguistic description is not value-free, and that, in particular, work on sex differences in language is carried out in an androcentric framework.

In Britain and America today, folklinguistic myths about sex differences are alive and well. In an attitude test which used cartoon captions as a stimulus, Kramer (1974) found that students of both sexes characterised women's speech as "stupid, vague, emotional, confused, and wordy". Sociolinguists are not immune to

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such attitudes; like everyone else, we are products, and perpetuators, of the culture we live in. Early work on language and sex differences had the undoubted merit of putting the issue of 'women's language' on the sociolinguistic agenda. However, it has also perpetuated folklinguistic myths about the inferiority of women's language.

Perhaps the most famous of these early publications is Lakoff's Language and Woman's Place (1975). Lakoff's description of language used by and about women is anecdotal rather than based on empirical evidence; not surprisingly, many of her claims have proved controversial. Her general claim is that there is a distinctive female speech style; more importantly, from the point of view of this paper, she describes this speech style in negative terms. The following passage typifies her position:

> "If the little girl learns her lesson well, she is not rewarded with unquestioned acceptance on the part of society; rather, the acquisition of this special style of speech will later be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position, to refuse to take her seriously as a human being. Because of the way she speaks, the little girl - now grown to womanhood - will be accused of being unable to speak precisely or to express herself forcefully." (Lakoff 1975:5)

She claims that the overall effect of using this style is to submerge a woman's identity 'by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly ... and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it' (ibid:7).

2. Problems of interpretation

There is no dispute over the findings of empirical research which have emerged since the publication of Lakoff's paper. Sex differences have been found in many aspects of speech style, for example: women ask more questions (Brouwer, Gerritsen & Dettaan 1979); women use more minimal responses (Fishman 1980, 1983); women hedge their utterances more (Holmes 1984); men use more interruptions (Zimmerman & West 1975; West & Zimmerman 1983). The problem arises with interpretation of these findings.

The two main approaches to sex differences in speech style are known as the **dominance** approach and the **difference** (or **subculture**) approach. The dominance approach interprets linguistic differences in women's and men's speech styles as a reflection of men's dominance and women's subordination. The difference approach emphasises the idea that women and men belong to different subcultures; the differences in women's and men's speech styles are interpreted as reflecting these different subcultures.

Research adopting the dominance approach sees the hierarchical nature of gender relations as the primary factor causing sex differences. Lakoff's essay is a good example: she equates 'subordinate' with 'weak', and interprets women's language as intrinsically inferior to men's. Much of the work on linguistic sex differences cited above also takes this approach. Fishman

(1983) describes women's use of minimal responses in mixed interaction as 'conversational shitwork'; West and Zimmerman (1983) describe male patterns of interruption as 'a way of "doing" power in face-to-face interaction, and ... a way of "doing" gender as well'.

There is no doubt that the way women and men talk creates and maintains inequality between the sexes. However, this approach - in effect, a deficit model - is less helpful when we look at single-sex rather than mixed interaction. The difference approach has evolved as part of the explanatory framework for work on same-sex interaction. According to some researchers, women and men have different speech styles because they are socialised in different sociolinguistic subcultures. This approach reflects a growing political awareness among linguists that to label men's language as 'strong' and women's as 'weak' is to adopt an androcentric viewpoint. Moreover, the elision of female gender with subordinate status is simplistic. The difference, or subculture, approach attempts to investigate sex differences in speech style, and in particular, women's speech, from a positive standpoint.

3. Women talking to women

I want to look in detail at three linguistic forms which are widely recognised as being typical of women's speech style: minimal responses, hedges, and tag questions. These forms have all been described as 'weak'. I want to argue that such a description is inappropriate when we examine their usage in all-female discourse.

All-female discourse differs from mixed interaction in that it is **symmetrical**. Women who are friends talk to each other as equals (as do men who are friends). It has been observed that informal conversation among women friends can be characterised as **cooperative** (Kalcik 1975, Aries 1976, Goodwin 1980, Malz & Borker 1982). **Cooperativeness** is used by these writers not in the sense of Grice (1975), but to refer to a particular type of conversation where speakers work together to produce shared meanings. Set against this notion of cooperativeness is the notion of competitiveness; competitiveness is used to describe an adversarial style of conversation where speakers vie for turns and where participants are more likely to contradict each other than to build on each other's contributions. (It is claimed that this adversarial style is more typical of all-male conversation.)

At the heart of cooperativeness is a view of speakers collaborating in the production of text: the group takes precedence over the individual. When women talk to each other as friends their chief goal in conversation is not the exchange of information, but the maintenance of good social relationships. The conversational strategies used by women in this context are not a sign of weakness but are chosen precisely because they help to achieve the goal of consolidating friendship.

The material used in this paper is taken from transcriptions of the conversations of a group of women friends recorded surreptitiously over a period of 9 months during 1983-4.(1) These women had been friends for 8 years; they met regularly in the evening at each other's houses to have a drink and to talk.

3.1 Minimal responses

Research on the use of minimal responses is unanimous in showing that women use them more than men (Hirschmann 1974; Zimmerman & West 1975; Fishman 1980, 1983). Such research focuses on women's use of such forms in mixed interaction, where they function to support men as speakers (it is this servicing function which is described as 'conversational shitwork' by Fishman, 1983). It should not be automatically assumed that the use of these forms denotes powerlessness, however. The same form may function in different ways in different contexts. Certainly it is clear from my data that the use of minimal responses also characterises linguistic interaction between women who are friends and equals.

Minimal responses are used in two different ways in the women's conversations I recorded. In the discussion sections, which are essentially multi-party and interactive, they are used to support the speaker and to indicate the listener's active attention. This is illustrated in example (1) below, where the women are discussing whether it would be taboo to miss your mother's funeral.

(1) C: I think I would go now because probably because I would

C: want to go= cos it would be very easy to go=
E: =mm
D: =yeah=
A: =yeah

While C talks, first E, then D and A one after the other add their minimal responses. These responses are well placed: they are timed to come at the end of an information unit (e.g. a tone group or clause), yet so well anticipated is this point that the speaker's flow is not interrupted. (Both Zimmerman & West and Fishman have shown how the delayed minimal response is used by male speakers to indicate lack of interest and/or attention.) These minimal responses signal the listener's active participation in the conversation; they are an important component in the joint production of text.

In the narrative sections of the conversation, where one speaker holds the floor with the telling of an anecdote, minimal responses seem to have another meaning. They are used far less frequently, and when they occur they signal agreement among participants that a particular stage of conversation has been reached. For example, when a speaker introduces a new topic, as in example (2) below, there are no contributions by other speakers until the topic has been established.

(2) A: this bloke I met today who's doing (.) he he's doing some postgraduate research at at Stirling (.) anyway I asked him he he wanted to talk to me about a professional matter and I (.) I said (.) I was asking him his sort of background and he said that he'd done philosophy (.) so I was just interested with little snippets of philosophy that came my way you see and he said one of the things that he was interested in was taboo (.) the nature of taboo (.) and he said that (-) and he gave this example that um (.) if you didn't go to your mother's funeral (-) because you'd got something else to do (.) it would be very much frowned upon um even though what you had to do could easily

D: oh god=

B: =mhm

be more important and after all she's dead= (.) and

C: =mhm

wouldn't know you weren't going kind of thing

It seems that D, B and C are indicating to A that they have taken the point of her anecdote, and that they accept it as a topic.

In example (3), which comes at the end of the same passage on taboo and mother's funerals, D's summary is followed by minimal responses from <u>all</u> the other participants.

(3) D: there's <u>two</u> things aren't there# there's the the the other people like your mother or father who's left and or or siblings and there's also how how you feel at that time about (.) the easiness of going=

E: =mm=

C: =mm=

A: =mm=

B: =yeah

Clearly the women feel the need to indicate their active agreement with D's summing up. In both these examples, it is not just the presence of minimal responses at the end, but also their absence during the course of an anecdote or summary, which demonstrates the sensitivity of participants to the norms of interaction: speakers recognise different types of talk and use minimal responses appropriately.

3.2 <u>Hedges</u>

'Hedge' is the term used to refer to a large and disparate set of words and phrases whose function is to mitigate the force of what is said. Thus in the utterance <u>Perhaps it'll rain</u>, the word <u>perhaps</u> weakens the force of the proposition <u>it will rain</u>. Hedges are often viewed as stereotypically female as a result of being included in Lakoff's description of women's language. She asserts that forms like <u>well</u>, <u>sort of</u>, <u>you know</u>, <u>I think</u> are more common in women's speech. She defines them as: 'words that convey the sense that the speaker is uncertain about what he (or she) is saying, or cannot vouch for the accuracy of the statement' (Lakoff 1975:53). She argues that, while the use of such forms is 'fully

legitimate' where there is uncertainty, or where the speaker out of politeness wishes to mitigate 'the possible unfriendliness or unkindness of a statement' (ibid:54), their use in other contexts is a sign that the speaker lacks confidence. Such usage is, she claims, typical of women 'precisely because they are socialised to believe that asserting themselves strongly isn't nice or ladylike, or even feminine'.

My research indicates that women do exploit these forms more than men, but whether this indicates that they are afraid to assert themselves is another question. In mixed sex interaction, where power is unevenly distributed between the sexes, then women's use of such forms could be argued to indicate submissiveness or lack of assertiveness. But in all-female interaction, this seem a less plausible explanation. Where the women involved are friends and equals, we need to ask what functions the use of such forms is serving.

As part of my investigation into single-sex interaction, I carried out a detailed comparison of two 40-minute stretches of conversation, one all-male [2], the other all-female. Both texts were recorded in the evening at the homes of linguists who had asked their unsuspecting friends round for a drink. In both cases, the participants were white, well-educated, middle class, in their late 30s or early 40s. The crude totals for the use of the six most frequently occurring hedges are given in Table 1 below.

	women	men
you know	42	84
I mean	77	20
well	65	45
just	57	48
I think	36	12
sort of	35	10

TABLE 1: SEX DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF HEDGES

These figures must obviously be treated with caution: the sample is very small. However, there are some interesting tendencies. First, the pattern for you know, one of the hedges specifically mentioned by Lakoff, is quite different from that found for other hedges; it is used more by men than by women. Does this mean that these particular men are unusually unassertive? Or does it mean that you know needs to be treated separately? There is not space to deal with this issue here, but it should be noted that Holmes (1986) also finds that male speakers use you know twice as often as female speakers in same-sex conversations.

For the other five hedges, women's usage is greater than men's, particularly in the case of I mean and I think. What functions are such forms fulfilling? The examples below illustrate the way hedges are used in the women's conversations I have recorded.

(4) [talking about an old friend she's recently bumped into]
she looks very sort of um - kind of matronly really

(5) [taboo and going to funerals]
I mean I think it really depends on the attitude of the survivors who are there

(6) [discussion of Yorkshire Ripper case]
oh god yes well I mean we were living in Yorkshire at the time and I - I mean I . I mean I did# I sort of thought well . could it be John#

It is my contention (see Coates 1987:129) that women exploit the multifunctional nature of hedges. They use them to mitigate the force of an utterance in order to respect addressees' face needs. Thus, the underlined forms in example (4) hedge the assertion she looks matronly not because the speaker doubts its truth but because she does not want to offend her addressees by assuming their agreement (describing a friend in unflattering terms is controversial). Such forms also protect the speaker's face: the speaker in (4) can retreat from the proposition expressed there if it turns out to be unacceptable. Similar considerations apply to (5) and (6). In (5), the speaker is putting forward the point of view that the crucial factor determining whether you attend your mother's funeral or not is the wishes of your father or other surviving relatives; she hedges her utterance to avoid coming into disagreement with other speakers. This tactic allows new views to be aired without forestalling further discussion. The speaker also protects her own face and that of her addressees in case her point of view turns out to be controversial.

In both examples (5) and (6) the sensitivity of the topic requires speakers to air their views cautiously. Where self-disclosure is involved, the speaker is particularly vulnerable and so will use hedges as a face-protecting device. In (6), the speaker reveals to her friends that police appeals for women in Yorkshire to consider the men they knew had led her to consider her own husband. This is a very sensitive area: the speaker lays herself open to the charge of disloyalty; worse, she admits to having wondered if her husband could be a murderer. On the other hand, she needs to reveal this fact to her friends in order to reassure herself that she has not behaved abnormally. Because of its face-threatening nature, self-disclosure is typically accompanied by hedging.

Women's greater use of hedges can be explained in part by topic choice. The women's conversations I have analysed involve predominantly topics relating to people and to feelings, as the examples in this paper illustrate. Men talking to other men seem to prefer to talk about things. In the all-male conversation I analysed, the men discuss home beer making, the relative merits of Guinness and Newcastle Brown, the complexity of modern hi-fi

systems, how to switch reels when showing a film. Presumably such topics do not trigger the use of hedges because they are not so face-threatening.

Another crucial feature of all-female discourse is self-disclosure. It is the medium through which experiences, and the emotions associated with those experiences, are shared. This sharing of feelings has the merit of promoting in-group solidarity; but it is fraught with risk in that it makes the speaker vulnerable, as well as threatening addressees' face. Clearly, hedges are a valuable resource for any group which wishes to facilitate self-disclosure.

3.3 Tag questions

The tag question is the linguistic form which has come to hold the position of archetypal women's feature as a result of Lakoff's focus on it. Lakoff's example It's so hot, isn't it? is meant to demonstrate the innate weakness of such usage - she argues that it would be more forceful to say simply It's so hot. On the grounds that 'questioning one's own opinions is futile', she claims that the only 'legitimate' tag is one which seeks information.

There are several problems with Lakoff's analysis of tag questions. Firstly, it is not clear from empirical studies that women use these forms more than men (see Dubois & Crouch 1975). Moreover, nothing very sensible can be said about tag question usage unless it is conceded that this one form has several different functions; research indicates that men use more modal tags (those which seek information), while women use more affective tags (those which indicate concern for the addressee; see Holmes 1984; Cameron et al 1989). Another problem is that work in discourse analysis suggests that the use of addressee-oriented tags (those described as illegitimate by Lakoff) is strongly associated with powerful rather than powerless speakers (see Harris 1984; Cameron, McAlinden & O'Leary 1989).

My analysis of the use of tag questions in all-female conversation shows that, as in mixed interaction, women use more affective (addressee-oriented) tags. In one of the conversations I recorded (about 40 minutes of transcribed material) there are 23 tag questions, yet of these only 4 are used to elicit information; the rest are addressee-oriented. Addressee-oriented tags can be used either to soften the force of negatively affective utterances or to facilitate interaction (see Holmes 1984). It is facilitative tags which Lakoff labelled 'illegitimate' and which she surmised were typical of women's speech. Facilitative tags have been given this name precisely because they are used to facilitate the participation of others. The following two examples illustrate this (tags underlined).

(7) E: but I mean so much research is male-dominated# I mean it's just . it's staggering isn't it=
A: =mhm

(8) D: it was dreadful wasn't it=
E: =appalling Caroline absolutely appalling

In asymmetrical discourse, the frequent occurrence of such tags seems to be related to their conducive nature: that is, powerful speakers, such as magistrates (Harris 1984) or chat show hosts (Cameron et al 1989), use them to get other participants to speak. In my data, that is, in symmetrical discourse, facilitative tags occur frequently (18 out of 23 tags), but they are not used conducively. Where the use of such tags results in another participant speaking, the response is brief (as in examples 7 and 8). More remarkably, the majority of facilitative tags occurring in my data produce no response at all, or at most a minimal response. Instead they occur in mid-utterance, and the speaker seems to expect no verbal response. Examples (9) and (10) illustrate this type:

(9) I think the most difficult thing is is that when you love someone you you half the time you forget their faults (yes) don't you and still maybe love them but I mean ....

(10) [Yorkshire Ripper case]
A: and they had they had a very accurate picture of him

A: didn't they they roughly knew his age=
D: = at one point they

A: =yeah=
D: knew about his gap teeth too didn't they= =then they

D: got rid of that

Of the 18 facilitative tags, 9 occur in mid-utterance, like these; another three come at the end of a speaker's turn but elicit no overt response. Most of the remaining examples appear as comments by active listeners, as in (11) below.

(11) D: cos I'm fed up of travelling to conferences but I'm
B: oh it's so

D: giving a paper
B: typical isn't it

All these examples involve falling intonation, and all expect the answer yes.

The women conversationalists seem to use these tags to check the taken-for-grantedness of what is being said. Paralinguistic cues (nodding, smiling, etc.), and sometimes minimal responses, signal to the speaker that what she is saying has the support of the group. This type of facilitative tag has not been remarked on before. It is facilitative in that it is part of the process by

which women speakers arrive at a consensus. To call such tags 'illegitimate' is to misunderstand their function. Moreover, I would argue that these tags are not a sign of weakness; they are one of the means used by women to produce discourse cooperatively.

4. Women's discourse: weak or strong?

In this paper, I have examined minimal responses, hedges and tag questions. In friendly all-female conversation, these linguistic forms function as cooperative devices. Participants use minimal responses to signal their active listenership and support for the current speaker; they use them too to mark their recognition of the different stages of conversational development. Hedges are used to respect the face needs of all participants, to negotiate sensitive topics, and to encourage the participation of others; one effect of hedging is that the speaker does not take a hard line - where a group rather than an individual overview is the aim of discussion, then linguistic forms which mitigate the force of individual contributions are a valuable resource. Tag questions also encourage the participation of others; among women friends, however, they are more often used to check the taken-for-granted nature of what is being asserted, to monitor that the speaker has the support of the group.

Misunderstanding of women's linguistic style arises from a failure to understand women's subculture. In all-female conversation, features typical of women's speech can be shown to be functional in terms of the goals of all-female interaction.To dismiss this style as weak and tentative is to collude in the dominant view of what is normal. It is illogical to attribute weakness to linguistic forms just because they are typical of the speech style of a group of speakers who are not the dominant group in a given society. Black oral narrative in the U.S., for example, is analysed in its own terms (e.g. Labov 1972) even though black speakers form a relatively powerless group in that society.

So while it would be naive to claim that women's subculture exists outside existing power structures, it would be equally unrealistic to label the linguistic style used by women as simply 'oppressed'or 'powerless'. Yet Coupland & Coupland (1988:144) have argued that only a dominance approach is tenable, on the grounds that 'female repertoires .... are 'different' essentially in their powerlessness'. They make the strong claim that the representation of female repertoires as different (and strong) rather than powerless is to collude in the continuing repression of women. I challenge this view: it is part of a historical tradition which sees women's culture as an aberration from a male norm (see the Androcentric Rule).

Furthermore, 'powerlessness' is quite inaccurate as a description of the linguistic style used by women talking to other women in a friendly context. When used reciprocally, this style can be used as a powerful sign of mutual support and solidarity. In many respects, such language approaches the ideal of cooperative discourse - what those who work in the counselling

professions call 'co-counselling'. Ironically, it has long been recognised in the psychological field that communicative sensitivity is one of women's strengths, and that inexpressivity is a male problem (see, for example, Noller & Fitzpatrick 1988).

It is very important that we do not conflate the 'women's language' said to be typical of mixed interaction with the 'women's language' which characterises all-female discourse. The two need to be analysed separately. Inter-group interaction will inevitably differ from intra-group interaction. Moreover, growing awareness of the norms - and the strengths - of all-female discourse may help us to reassess our interpretation of the linguistic forms used by women in mixed interaction. In different contexts, different styles are appropriate. It is my contention that, while 'male' conversational style may be well adapted to public domains where information exchange is a priority, women's conversational style is better suited to the needs of informal interaction between equals where the maintenance of good social relationships is the priority. The strengths of women's conversational strategies in all-female interaction need to be asserted: to do this we need a difference and not a deficit model.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a more detailed description of the data and my methods in obtaining it, see Coates (forthcoming). I would like to place on record once again my gratitude to my friends for their cooperation in this venture.
2. I am grateful to Professor S. Greenbaum for allowing me to use material from the Survey of English Usage, University College London.

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